

PROTECTING LIVES AROUND THE WATER

By Toni Westland and Robert Schnell, US Army Corps of Engineers Park Rangers

How can the US Army Corps of Engineers promote water safety in a new, fun and exciting way to students? **GET IN THE WATER WITH THEM!** Recently, Park Ranger's Toni Westland and Robert Schnell have found a fun and interactive way to get the kids to enjoy wearing their Personal Flotation Devices (P.F.D.). The Okeechobee Waterway park rangers went poolside to



explain to a group of summer campers the importance of P.F.D.'s. Most of the time children can demonstrate how to wear a P.F.D. on land. While that is a valuable skill, putting one on in the water is more realistic and difficult. Think about the last time you went boating. Where was your P.F.D.? Probably stored away in a compartment. If your boat capsized, would you be able to locate your P.F.D. and put it on in the water? Well, that's what the park rangers

had the kids do. Everyone entered into the pool laying on their P.F.D. and when they heard the word GO, everyone put his or her P.F.D. on. Some of the children struggled while others were a Pro. Though the parents did not participate, they still learned an important lesson by watching their children and how difficult it can be to put on your P.F.D. while in the water. The park ranger's didn't realize how much of a hit the P.F.D.'s were going to be, because once the P.F.D.'s were on the children. BANG! !! The pool turned into a sea of orange PFDs as the students began swimming, splashing and enjoying their new tools. This unexpected turn of events was wonderful. Not only did the children learn the importance of wearing a P.F.D. but they also learned how much fun it can be to wear and enjoy. There were many other hands on water safety lessons taught to them such as how important it is to wear the correct size PFD, how

to identify a drowning victim, and how to help someone in trouble while at the pool. Accidents happen especially when we least expect them. According to the US Coast Guard, the state of Florida leads the nation in water related accidents and deaths. So why not be prepared. When you're boating you should always wear a life jacket or Personal Flotation Device (P.F.D.). The State of Florida requires all children under 6 years old on vessels under 26 feet to wear a P.F.D. and all



Personal Water Craft operators and skiers regardless of age must wear a P.F.D. At Lake Okeechobee and the Okeechobee Waterway (OWW) we take water safety seriously, especially when there is 152 miles of shoreline with over 6 million visits annually to the project. Our park ranger and volunteer staff promote water safety year round by providing informative talks to



children and adults, attending various events and distributing water safety items, teaming up with various agencies to spread the word, and posting billboards along the waterway. Our staff reached over 20,000 children last year by educating them on the importance of wearing a P.F.D. Always remember to be safe in and around the water. The staff at Lake Okeechobee takes water safety seriously and so should you. No one can afford to lose their life by not wearing their P.F.D. For more

information concerning water safety and Lake Okeechobee and the Okeechobee Waterway, please visit us at our website <http://www.saj.usace.army.mil/recreation/index.html>